
IRAQ'S ETHNIC, RELIGIOUS GROUPS FRAGMENTED AS ELECTIONS NEAR

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Long beset by toxic divisions, Iraq seems to be growing even more fragmented ahead of national elections scheduled for May, with Iranian influence set to grow and the minority Sunnis seething as they fend for themselves in areas of the country shattered by the three-year war against the Islamic State group.

The Sunnis, many of them in displacement camps, bore the brunt of the war's destruction and have been left so bereft that many don't even have the papers needed to register to vote. If they don't end up feeling the vote was fair, that could badly undermine the international community's goal of bringing about the more inclusive government critical to maintaining a unified state and avoiding a repeat of the IS disaster.

Adding to the volatile mix are the Iranian-backed Shiite militias, now even more politically involved, which are allied with but not controlled by the Shiite-led Baghdad government, and appear set to gain influence that would alarm many in the region trying to check the power of Shiite, non-Arab Iran.

If divisions among Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds persist they could lead to more protracted talks to form a new government, potentially delaying the colossal task of rebuilding Iraq after IS overran nearly a third of the country in 2014, mostly Sunni towns, and then hung on as a U.S.-led coalition surrounded and bombarded the areas they controlled.

The extremist group was able to at least initially benefit from some popular support among Sunnis. After the ouster of Saddam Hussein, a Sunni, many Sunnis felt marginalized as parties led by Shiites were able to win elections by sheer numbers; Sunnis, in turn, felt they had lost their fair share of power.

Sunnis are worried that the Shiite influence mainly of the Iran-backed militias will grow in their areas if the Shiite-backed Sunni candidates win, and that will make it hard for them to come

together in the future.?

Aware of the problem, politicians now appear to be trying to distance themselves from openly sectarian rhetoric in the run-up to the vote, saying they will form diverse and cross-sectarian coalitions. But many expect the generally chaotic post-election creation of a parliament majority will be sectarian in nature nonetheless.

"Differences now are deeper than before in that everyone is seeking influence in the next government," said Ali al-Adeeb, a leading Shiite politician. "Thus, the process of forming the new government will be complicated and any further delay will further complicate the political and security scene."

Nearly 7,000 candidates will vie for 329 seats in parliament the May 12 elections, the fourth since the 2003 U.S.-led invasion that removed Saddam from power, according to the Independent High Electoral Commission.

Candidates have formed 27 political coalitions and last month, the electoral commission extended the deadline for registering the alliances as political parties worked to negotiate deals, but failed.

Sunni candidates are divided among three big alliances and up to seven small ones. Leaders had demanded a delay in elections for up to six months arguing that many of their voters are in areas that suffered some of the worst destruction in the war. Constituents would not have enough time to gather paperwork and update their personal information in time to cast their ballots, they argued. There are still nearly 2.5 million people displaced by the war around the country.

Sunni lawmaker Mohammed al-Karboli said Sunni candidates will have a difficult time facing more dominant Shiite political groups who have far more resources. "The Sunnis will have a weak presence in the next parliament. We are not optimistic about the coming elections," he said.

Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi announced he is seeking re-election with his recently formed Victory Alliance, running separately from rival Nouri al-Maliki's State of Law coalition. Al-Maliki is currently vice president; he was prime minister from 2006 to 2014.

Both men are members of the Shiite Islamist Dawa party, which has said its supporters can vote for either candidate.

Primed to play a major role in the election is the Conquest Alliance, a coalition of popular Iran-backed militias led by Hadi al-Amiri, leader of the Badr Brigade, one of the country's most prominent Shiite militia groups. Lawmaker Ahmed al-Asadi said the Conquest Alliance has its eye on the position of prime minister.

A deal had been announced between al-Abadi's party and the Alliance but it lasted only two days. The breakup came at the behest of Qassem Soleimani, head of Iran's elite Quds Force and a key adviser to the Shiite militias, two senior Shiite politicians said. Both spoke on condition of anonymity as they were not authorized to release information.

Soleimani's involvement suggests Iran is endeavoring to install its militia allies into power for its own political purposes.

A source who also asked to go unnamed said neither al-Abadi nor the Conquest Alliance could agree on what percentage of representation the Alliance would have inside al-Abadi's coalition. Another source close to al-Abadi said it was Iran who first asked the Conquest Alliance to join al-Abadi and then withdrew in order to embarrass the prime minister in front of the West.

Lawmaker Mohammed Mahdi al-Bayati said he believes the militias, who were instrumental in defeating IS, will do well because of their popularity in both Shiite and Sunni areas. If they do well enough, they plan to propose al-Amri, the Badr Brigade leader, for prime minister, he said.

"Iran stands with us in the fight, so it will be happy if we win in the elections," al-Bayati said.

The prime minister position is reserved for Shiites under an unofficial agreement dating back to 2003. The same agreement stipulates that the widely ceremonial president post be held by a Kurd, while the parliament speaker is Sunni.

Meanwhile, the followers of Iraq's firebrand Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr will also field candidates in their Marchers Alliance, while Shiite cleric Ammar al-Hakim, who previously split from the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, will lead his National Wisdom Movement.

In the country's north, ethnic Kurds who used to run on two or three lists inside and outside their self-ruled region are broken into at least six lists as differences have been exacerbated after the

September referendum on independence resulted in harsh measures from Baghdad. Some prominent Kurdish politicians have joined Arab-led lists.

In his briefing to the United Nation Security Council on Feb. 20, special envoy to Iraq Jan Kubis said cross-sectarian and cross-ethnic coalitions across the political spectrum are essential.

"Only a new government based on such an approach will guarantee the future of Iraq as a united, democratic, fully sovereign and independent federal state, as a factor of stability, cooperation and prosperity for its people and for the region," he said.

Kaynak/Source: